

## LEARNERS' AUTONOMY - A CRITICAL STUDY OF ITS STANCE IN THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE PEDAGOGIES

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### ABSTRACT

*The use of English Language in international and intercultural scenario demands a higher degree of acceptance, and openness on the part of a speaker/language user. Other than what's offered by the native speakers of English, learners of English need to focus on the independent thinking and action that will develop them into competent language users, and autonomous agents. The active transforming agent is ELT (English Language Teaching) in the actual classrooms, not the formal/professional discourse as displayed by publications and conferences etc. The professional discourse focuses on "communicating to learn" rather than "learning to communicate" (Waters, October 2012) approach which is the genuine crux of classroom learning. Learner's autonomy, if gets emphasis in this setting will exhibit a dynamic modification in its stance both inside and outside the classroom. The present paper focuses on the issues, such as, when, how and to what extent the learners need to exercise autonomy, and should it be 100% self-governing, i.e. teacher free approach or should the learner and teacher's autonomy go hand in hand to achieve the desired learning outcomes? Should the concept of learner's autonomy be considered an add-on, or the core agenda of any educational/academic program? This article focuses on the need of the perception of learner's autonomy in any language pedagogy and brings into focus the relevant past linguistic theories, present challenges, and finally the future implications as well.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Learners' Autonomy, Autonomous Agent, Self-Governing, Past Linguistic Theories & Present Challenges*

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### INTRODUCTION

Learner's autonomy, now a days, is dominating the language pedagogy and language use to a larger extent. In the present scenario, learner's autonomy needs to be considered in the perspective of coping up with the growing requirement of communicative competence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ELT. Past few decades have witnessed a great many changes in the ELT scenario. It has become more challenging to English language learners/speakers. In recent years, ELT's bent is more towards the classroom pedagogies instead of professional discourse that focuses more on theoretical language use. It's believed now that professional discourse doesn't directly correspond to factual practices being carried out in the classrooms. Classrooms, being generally invisible, remain in the background and the language use is therefore affected greatly, (Waters, October 2012). In order to bring it to the foreground, learner's role needs to be realized and his voice needs to be given dominance in any language pedagogy and use in multiple circumstances and situations.

In order to know the reason of transition from traditional pedagogical approach to modern pedagogical approach, a few linguistic theories need to be taken into consideration. It's universally recognized that changes in linguistic theories give birth to modern pedagogical theories. According to Xia, (May 2014), the linguistic theories

basically pass through the following 3 stages:

- Traditional Grammar
- Structuralism
- Functionalism

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Little. D (Little, 2007) stresses on the fact that “autonomous language use is the aim of any language learning”. When we talk about language use, it refers to the communicative competence that is the essence of language use in any context and situation. It requires further exploration of the liaison of learners’ autonomy to various linguistic theories and pedagogies, especially the ‘Communicative Language teaching’. The present paper focuses on this issue and explores learners’ autonomy and its stance in the past linguistic theories, its present practices, and future implications.

Various linguists defined the term ‘learners’ autonomy’ from their own perspective. Most of them are of the view that learners’ autonomy in a language learning process refers to the ‘self-directed’ learning, and it’s mostly independent and self-regulatory, but self-directed learning in no way means learning without a teacher. With the revolution in learner’s role, the teacher’s role has experienced modifications as well. According to Lamb &Reinders, (2005), whether learning is carried out with or without a teacher, a learner needs to be autonomous in order to be able to learn independently. In this context, learners’ awareness of his learning objectives and the knowledge of how to direct the learning process to achieve the desired outcomes, inside and outside the classrooms in various situations and contexts, are of utmost significance. The autonomy on part of the learner means enriching his vision with the actual knowledge and skills required while interacting in a real life situation. This is the very focus of the present paper. The concept of learners’ autonomy is revisited and given a new perspective and is left open for further exploration.

## METHODOLOGY

Research questions dealt within the present paper are:

- How did the concept of learners’ autonomy evolve from the past theories and reached its present state?
- What is the relationship of learners’ autonomy to the communicative competence?
- When, how and to what extent learners need to be given autonomy?

The assimilated data is analysed qualitatively. Data is collected through a questionnaire and a few interviews. Both structured and unstructured interviews are held among the teachers of the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at Jazan University in Saudi Arabia. Around 20 teachers took part in the survey.

## TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

It’s also known as prescriptive grammar. It focuses on “how language should be used” instead of “what language is used”. It values the old language model, emphasizes the written language, and neglects the oral language. It tries to purify language and settle it, (Illes, October 2012). In 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was adopted by most of the schools in Rome and Greece so it also called “School Grammar”, (Xia, May 2014). The pedagogy developed from Traditional Grammar was “Grammar Translation Method”.

In the above mentioned pedagogical approach, more than oral, written language was emphasized. Its goal/aim was to translate the target/foreign language into learners' native language. There wasn't any innovation or creativity in this method. The learners' voice and autonomy was totally overshadowed by teachers' echoing/dominating voice. This method totally ignores the language skills' training and communication aspect of language use. Spoken language was nowhere. Unfortunately, still this method is in use in many schools and academic institutions. Teachers still are dominating and curbing the learners' voice completely. Language is just a tool used to transmit the translated version of target language into the native language of the learner. Learner is the silent receiver on the other end, poured and filled with the information.

## **STRUCTURALISM**

Due to the traditional grammar's limitations, some linguists got dissatisfied and found it a hindrance in the way of active language/linguistic research. The investigation in this area brought about a new linguistic theory 'Structuralism'. A Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure is regarded as the father of 'Structuralism'. His main focus was the nature and composition of language and its constituent parts. He affirmed that language is a complex organic unity with its own internal and systematic values. Structuralism is highly descriptive. It considers language to be a kind of well-developed communication system. Where traditional grammar focuses on the inner structures of language as independent from each other, structuralism considers language to be a systematic whole, having all inner structures closely linked. Structuralism has two schools; European schools lead by Ferdinand Saussure and American school lead by Leonard Bloomfield. Bloomfield considers behaviouristic approach to be fundamental to language study. He believes that observable can be studied only and in case of language, behaviour is the only thing observable, so it's the bases of language study. Because of this approach, a new pedagogy became popular and that was 'Audio-Lingual methodology of language teaching'.

Audio-lingual teaching method focuses on the fact that a language needs to be spoken by the language learners rather than written by them. It's more of a human habit, and is learnt through drilling and practicing instead of acquiring knowledge of it. Mimicking and drilling are at the core of the Audio-lingual pedagogy. Learners mimic and repeat the target language sentences until they become proficient in that. Communicative activities at their initial stages were carried out by repeating the dialogues/sentences time and again. They involved prolonged and boring drills. Teacher was believed to be a role model, who provides the students with standard intonation and pronunciation. Then student's role begins. At this stage teachers remain in the background, and acquire the role of the observers. They interfere only when any mistake is committed by the students. Teachers ask questions quickly one after another to develop automatic response in learners.

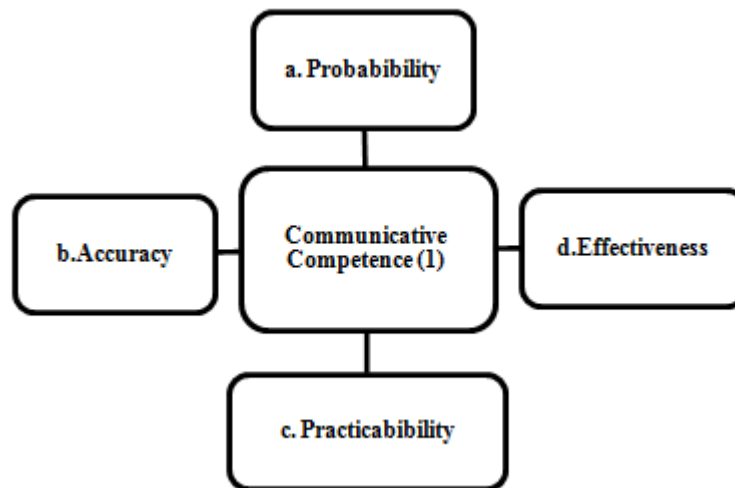
This approach shows a clear bent from written to oral language study, although with a lot of limitations. It was a great shift in which learners' voice started to be heard though in fixed patterns yet. Initially it was just the calculated dialogues/sentences, but gradually a little more started to be added by the speakers. As it was believed that language use stresses on learners' habit formation, and the learner was required to speak also in a controlled environment, so indirectly the learner was the core subject of this language pedagogy.

Structuralism by the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century underwent great changes by a renowned linguist Noam Chomsky, who brought "Transformational Generative Grammar" on the scene. He considers language to be a bit more complicated than it was generally considered. He believes that communicative competence is innate. His focus was on the language's complicated syntactic structure. He was of the view that language can't be learnt without learning its grammar. This theory met a lot of criticism and finally Dell Hymes's (1972) theory of 'Communicative Competence' appeared with a complete

shift from structuralism to Functionalism.

## FUNCTIONALISM

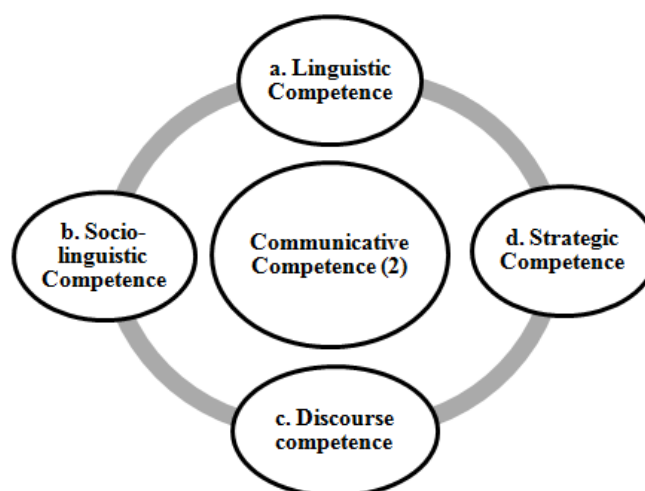
This approach focuses on the following key factors.



**Figure 1: Communicative Competence-1**

- **Probability:** Role of grammar in communicative competence
- **Accuracy:** Speech appropriateness in specific contexts
- **Practicability:** Role of language and the degree to which it can be used in communicative competence
- **Effectiveness:** Language's ability to convey the message effectively, i.e. making the language user comprehend and be comprehended as well.

During the latter half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Canale and Swain enriched the theory of communicative competence by contributing the below mentioned four aspects of knowledge and skills, (Xia, May 2014):



**Figure 2: Communicative Competence-2**

- Linguistic Competence: It refers to the innate knowledge of language.
- Socio-linguistic competence: Ability to understand other's speech and make an appropriate speech at a certain time and place.
- Discourse Competence: It refers to generating meaning out of tangled data.
- Strategic Competence: It refers to the ability to use different strategies as per the context requirement, for achieving success in communication.

### **Communicative Competence and Learners' Autonomy**

Later on the theory of 'Communicative Competence' was enriched further by other linguists, and this latest development made it much broader and scientific. The latest developments rest on the fact that learners need to be equipped with communicative competence to such a degree as to enable them to take part in everyday language activities confidently and efficiently. Functional aspect of language is considered much more important than its grammatical aspect. Forms are significant, but knowledge of functions is even more fundamental. For this, learners need to practice real communication in language learning classes. So the bench mark factor in this context is that pedagogy must focus on learner and his needs in day to day situations. If learners' needs are focused, the learning outcomes will be much more promising. The communicative approach in class pedagogy was first proposed by Widows, (1989). This approach focuses on two functions:

- What to teach?
- How to teach?

Both these factors need teachers and learners' voice to be heard for a better learning outcome. Teacher plays the role of a planner, participant, manager, organizer and observer. Learner plays the role of an implementer.

### **Challenges Faced By Communicative Competence and Learners' Autonomy**

The communicative learning approach can very easily cater to the learners' autonomy and his voice in multiple ways provided the teachers are adequately proficient. Still it has many challenges to face, like:

- When, how and to what degree learners need to be autonomous in any learning scenario/environment?
- Which tasks and activities can ensure maximum learners' autonomy?

The question like when, how and to what degree the learners should be given autonomy during the learning process needs to be analysed very critically and in much detail. To comprehend the complications of the issues, a questionnaire (adopted by Borg & al-busaidi, 2012, appendix 1) was administered to twenty teachers from the 'Preparatory Year Program' at Jazan University. 90 % of the faculty members were of the view that transferring autonomy to the learners is a very delicate and sensitive issue. In this regard issues like the maturity or traits required by the learners to exercise autonomy need special attention. The most significant question here is whether learners are capable of doing justice to it? Their future is dependent on this very notion and a little lapse can gravely affect it. So the answer to the question as to when, how and to what degree the learners need to be given autonomy during the learning process, depends very much on their academic standard, expertise and maturity. So again the role of teachers in this scenario becomes very vital. It is with the teachers' guidance only that decision making about the learners' autonomy can be established. Other

findings based on the data collected by the questionnaire, PYP faculty members highlighted the following important points:

- Autonomy can be developed in all level students depending on learners proficiency, motivation and confidence in a learning process
- Students need to be involved in task selection to obtain better outcomes interms of ensuring learners' autonomy
- Activities conducted outside the classrooms help develop the learners' autonomy to a greater extent
- Peer work enhances learners' autonomy
- Learners need to be made aware of the retorts to the below mentioned three fundamental queries:
  - What they are learning?
  - Why they are learning?
  - How will they learn it?

When faculty members of PYP were asked question about how they are trying to promote learners' autonomy? The responses received were quite diverse. Following is the summary of the practices being carried out by them in their classes for ensuring learners' autonomy.

- For more fruitful outcomes, problem solving skills needs to be activated in learners by selecting the appropriate activities and tasks in the classroom. Some problem solving skill boosting activities are as follow:
  - A few translation activities can provide a pragmatic exposure of the actual life situations to the learners, like brochure translation, i.e. vacations/academic etc. A translator keeps in focus the factors, like (i) audience, (ii) semantics, linguistics, cognitive, and stylistics equivalents keeping in focus target language culture. So translation is a good activity and promotes learners' problem solving skills.
  - Interviewing the class fellows and teachers inside and outside the classrooms can also help language users face real life challenges. "Corridor interviews" are also very important in developing problem solving skills in students. Pertinent tasks promote interpretative skills and force the students to crack the code and find solutions to be comprehended in everyday situation.
  - Role plays are also fundamental to establish learners' autonomy in any learning system. They help learners feel the real life situations and communicate in a natural environment.
- Project based learning, English Club and E-learning tools aid a lot to promote learners' autonomy.
- Involving learners in the selection of tasks and activities enhance their autonomy. They start taking the responsibility of their learning.
- Checking peers' work also gives learners a sense of responsibility, and this in turn helps in developing the autonomy in them.

However, monitoring learners' progress by adding checklists and inventories at the end of the unit or at various stages of the unit, like "I am able to" or "I can" is very theoretical and not in accordance with the communicative

competence's latest developments that focus on the pragmatic aspect and real language use in actual life situations. This approach is indifferent to the various situations a learner can encounter in real, day to day life, (Thrush, Baldwin & Blass, 2012, appendix2). Inventories like "I am able to..." instead of sorting out the issue, complicate it more. The learner acquires the false impression of knowing the rule, although he knows it only theoretically, or maybe practically, but to some extent only. Real life situations are dynamic and pose new challenges on day to day basis.

In order to fully entertain the learner's voice and autonomy, his role needs to be accepted in curriculum designing and in framing various tasks and activities as well. But at this stage, one fundamental issue to keep in focus is learners' expertise and his maturity in selecting, accepting and rejecting the learning materials, tasks and syllabus. To what extent the learners are supposed to be allowed to exercise autonomy, is a big question mark. In this regard 20 teachers of PYP at Jazan University were interviewed. The findings of the interview clearly exhibited that learners' autonomy doesn't refer to 100% authorization on the part of the learners in any learning process. It's not a teacher-less learning, but a guided, and supported learning in which the teachers acquire the role of a mentor, an advisor or a counsellor. Modifying, accepting or rejecting the teaching material, tasks or activities meant to be carried out inside and outside the classrooms, very much depend on the learners' edifying expertise, but only with the assistance and guidance of teachers' expertise. In a nutshell, the learner and the teacher, both accompany each other in any learning process. This concept is explained in detail, (Borg & al-busaidi, 2012). They highlighted the issue by eliciting the fact that:

First teachers' beliefs can powerfully shape both what teachers do and the learning opportunities the learners receive. Therefore the extent to and manner in which learner autonomy is promoted in language learning classrooms will be influenced by teachers' beliefs about what autonomy actually is, its desirability and feasibility. Second, teacher education is more likely to have an impact on teachers' practices when it is based on an understanding of the beliefs teachers hold. Understanding teachers' beliefs about autonomy are thus an essential element in the design of professional development activities aimed at promoting learning autonomy.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the present paper we witnessed learner's autonomy's evolution and stance in various past pedagogies and finally the locus it acquires in the present day learning process. At present, learners' autonomy is not considered an add on, but an integral part of language learning and usage, promoting students involvement in the process of communication and triggering the problem solving skills in general. 20<sup>th</sup> century poses new challenges to the language learner. He has to realize that language is spoken by bi or even multi lingual speakers globally. Exposure to different varieties in a classroom can enhance learners' capacity of comprehending new varieties in a better manner. The perception of learner's autonomy doesn't negate the presence or the vital role the teacher plays in the whole learning process. The only difference is in the role acquired by the teacher. In fact learner and teachers' autonomy complement each other. So the concept of learners' autonomy needs to be revisited. It's not just learners' participating in selecting, rejecting and framing classroom material, tasks and activities. It's much more intensive than that. It is actually equipping the learners with such autonomous power which they can use while communicating in real life situations. It's empowering them with confidence and problem solving skills to tackle any situation what so ever in the real life communication with other speakers. Lastly, it's to furnish them with the ability to comprehend others and be comprehended as well.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

#### Section 1: Questionnaire-Learner Autonomy

Please give your opinion about the statements below by ticking ONE answer for each. The statements are not just about your current job, and in answering you should consider your experience as a language teacher more generally.

#### Statement

- Language learners of all ages can develop learner autonomy. Strongly disagree, Disagree, Unsure, Agree, Strongly agree
- Independent study in the library is an activity which develops learner autonomy.
- Learner autonomy is promoted through regular opportunities for learners to complete tasks alone.
- Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.
- Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.
- Autonomy can develop most effectively through learning outside the classroom.
- Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.
- Learner autonomy means learning without a teacher.
- It is harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners.



- It is possible to promote learner autonomy with both young language learners and with adults.
- Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence.
- Learner autonomy allows language learners to learn more effectively than they otherwise would.
- Learner autonomy is promoted when learners have some choice in the kinds of activities they do.
- Learner autonomy can't be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms.
- Learner autonomy cannot develop without the help of the teacher.
- Learner autonomy is promoted by activities that encourage learners to work together.
- Learner autonomy is only possible with adult learners.
- Learner autonomy is promoted by independent work in a self-access center.
- Learner autonomy is a concept which is not suited to non-Western learners.
- Learner autonomy requires the learner to be totally independent of the teacher.
- Co-operative group work activities support the development of learner autonomy.
- Promoting autonomy is easier with beginning language learners than with more proficient learners.
- Learner autonomy is promoted when learners can choose their own learning materials.
- Learner-centered classrooms provide ideal conditions for developing learner autonomy.
- Learning how to learn is key to developing learner autonomy.
- Out-of-class tasks which require learners to use the internet promote learner autonomy.
- The ability to monitor one's learning is central to learner autonomy.
- Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.
- Learner autonomy has a positive effect on success as a language learner
- To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Learner Autonomy**

#### **Please Tell us about Your Background**

- Years of experience as an English language teacher (Tick ONE):  
0–4 ☐      5–9 ☐      10–14 ☐      15+ ☐
- Years of experience as an English language teacher at SQU (Tick ONE):  
0–4 ☐      5–9 ☐      10–14 ☐      15+ ☐
- Highest qualification (Tick ONE):

- Bachelor's ☐      Master's ☐      Doctorate ☐      Other ☐
- Nationality:
- Gender (Tick ONE):  
Male ☐      Female ☐
- At the Language Centre, which English program do you teach most hours on? (Tick ONE):
- English Foundation Program (Levels 1, 2) ☐
- English Foundation Program (Levels 3, 4 or 5) ☐
- Credit English Program ☐

## APPENDIX 2

**Self-Assessment Log**

Check (✓) the words and expressions that you learned in this chapter.

<b>Nouns</b> <input type="checkbox"/> appointment <input type="checkbox"/> client <input type="checkbox"/> (one's) company <input type="checkbox"/> construction <input type="checkbox"/> expenses <input type="checkbox"/> experience <input type="checkbox"/> journalism <input type="checkbox"/> major <input type="checkbox"/> presentation <input type="checkbox"/> public health	<input type="checkbox"/> relatives <input type="checkbox"/> reporter <input type="checkbox"/> résumé <input type="checkbox"/> youth hostels  <b>Verbs</b> <input type="checkbox"/> come up with <input type="checkbox"/> discuss <input type="checkbox"/> find out <input type="checkbox"/> get out of	<b>Adjectives</b> <input type="checkbox"/> accurate <input type="checkbox"/> challenging <input type="checkbox"/> full-time <input type="checkbox"/> impressive <input type="checkbox"/> part-time <input type="checkbox"/> rough <input type="checkbox"/> tired of	<b>Idioms and Expressions</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Don't mention it! <input type="checkbox"/> once in a lifetime
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Check (✓) the things you did in this chapter. How well can you do each one?

	Very well	Fairly well	Not very well
I can listen for the main ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can listen for specific information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can guess the meanings of words from context.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can identify stress and pronounce majors and job titles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can understand conversations about jobs and the workplace.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can use a cluster chart to organize information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can make polite complaints.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can use the Internet to find information about jobs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can create a pie chart to graph results.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Write about what you learned and what you liked in this chapter.

In this chapter,  
I learned \_\_\_\_\_

I liked \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 3**